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The Hostile Architecture of Late Stage Capitalism



Street encampment, along the Willamette River waterfront, Portland, Oregon. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

The US Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case that will undoubtedly set the course for future dealings with the homeless population. That already sounds ominous, right? The case involves the city of Grants Pass, Oregon and the practice of banning individuals from using means to protect themselves from the elements when occupying public spaces. By that I mean items like blankets. An appeals court has previously ruled in regard to that case that cities cannot punish those who have no place to go and simply try to protect themselves from bitter cold in public areas. The court decreed that this sort of thing

violates the 8th amendment's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. Unless Harlan Crow is visited by pro-decency Victorian ghosts and buys Clarence Thomas a newer RV, there's a very good chance that the Supreme Court will reverse this lower court's compassionate ruling.

The encampments are certainly growing around the United States; they are a very obvious exhibit A in regard to the failings of our current state of affairs. More surreptitiously, untold numbers of individuals are working and sleeping in their cars or hopping from couch to couch as the cost of living has become truly impossible. No true wage growth paired with inflationary balloons encompassing housing have created a situation of dire need for a vast number of individuals. In true American fashion, most of this is viewed as individual failings and no systemic overhauls have been forthcoming to address the crisis.

Zoning laws as well as other bureaucratic maneuverings have been used frequently to thwart those who would help the homeless population. Recently Chris Avell, an Ohio pastor wanted to help those homeless in the cold during a time local shelters were full. For his kindness, he found himself looking at 18 zoning violations for opening up the first floor of his church. Modern churches are supposed to be only symbolic of good, but not literally good, I suppose. Handing out food in parks can get you in similar trouble as a 78 year old Bullhead City, Arizona woman found out in 2022. Her attorney put it well: "Bullhead City has criminalized kindness". There are multitudes of these stories; Jesus would have been arrested for the bread and fish thing and I can't imagine the multiple laws against the wine/water trick. He definitely would need to have paid the right local people to get a local alcohol permit.

Conservatives and liberals alike seem to have joined in this criminalizing kindness campaign as Republican and Democratic officials have both filed briefs in support of Grants Pass and their determined cause to not allow tents, blankets, and cardboard boxes to be used by this vulnerable population. I haven't seen their full briefs, but I'm pretty sure the Republicans are adding punitive measures such as on-site executions. Thankfully the Democrats are only pushing for kneecap shootings after mandatory tent and blanket removal.

The trend towards "hostile architecture" is another glaring visual exhibit of our callousness to fellow humans. Ubiquitous spikes and benches that allow for sitting, but not sleeping are all a very real part of urban planning these days. Spikes in some locations are even to the point of being dangerous for those who might trip and fall near them. What a lovely society to have modern day iron maidens sporadically spread about. If we

unearthed a civilization in ruins and found evidence such as this—what would we think about that society? I have trouble envisioning urban planning students finding their dream job and it is creating spaces “hostile” to humans. What pride they must feel taking this career path! I suppose they probably marry pharmaceutical executives and they listen to NPR so it’s all good. Does it get any more dystopian than this?

We witness cities having massive freak-outs over homeless encampments expanding, but no consideration as to the conditions in society that have created this problem. How do you not see this explosion in need and suffering and not think perhaps we are backing an incorrect and untenable economic system? But as in so many cases, when America finds itself up against a problem, the solution is always violent and punitive with no introspection. And these types of “solutions” never take, do they? The let’s kick ’em when they’re down school of thought. The massive effort involved in militarized police sweeps of these camps as well as the lawyer power needed to go to the Supreme Court—how much could have been done with these resources if channeled towards safe housing creation?

I think much of the American population has a “hazing mentality” as in, I suffer to keep a roof over my head, why can’t they do the same? This is probably part of why the working class isn’t demanding change. It’s never a consideration that it should not be so hard for any of us. A land of ample resources, yet we allow something like 10 individuals to control vast amounts of this wealth. We see our government only use the collective coffers for the military and to supply genocidal colonial outposts, not to alleviate suffering in a tangible manner. There never seems to be money for that sort of thing, just funds for the misery making industrial complex.

At this point we allow proselytizing homeless shelters to be the place of last resort and they often get full. They also have rules and stipulations that to most individuals seem sane, but often part of the reason people fall into chronic homelessness is because they can’t maintain the needed “normalcy” to be there—of course mental illness is a huge component along with substance abuse. It’s basically two problems: that of helping individuals that for all practical purposes, won’t be able to make it in this gross hustle society and helping all of those individuals who are “following all the rules” but simply can’t afford the cost of living. Tangible acts could have been done to alleviate this out of control situation for the latter group. Rent control, rules against Airbnb takeovers of neighborhoods, no corporations being allowed to purchase single family homes, heavy and punitive taxation on multiple homes.....there are steps that could have been taken that

would have helped the matter (short of the revolution I'd like to see). But even those paltry protections have not been done. It's because we are seeing a sloppy free-for-all where even actions that would benefit everyone in the long run are being eschewed in favor of allowing the wealthy to bloat themselves at the expense of most of the population. Short-term plundering rules the day.

The tragedy of it all is that the money is certainly there to deal with this inhumanity. Massive amounts of housing are simply empty.....but in late-stage capitalism there has to be losers to maintain the cash flow to the top. The moment the realization that all of this is constructed to benefit only the very wealthy—that's when it all caves in. The threat of homelessness does more to keep workers in line than any other technique. To diligently work to solve homelessness would be to remove an existential threat that most of the working class has—they really can't have that. It's like the freedom that would come by extinguishing unnecessary student loan debt—it's a much more compliant group of workers when they are tethered to debt and fear. Decent people ask "how can we fix this?" but we have to realize that our upper-level decision-makers most likely don't want this solved.

So here's to hoping that Harlan Crow does get those supernatural Commie ghost visits and we see Clarence and Ginni on the road again in an even more fantastic RV because sadly, empathy and compassion are now in the hands of such creatures. Those who will literally take the blankets from the freezing.

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